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Page numbers: 2-11

Citation: Terlikbayeva, N. (2017). Integration of returnee children in Kazakhstani schools. *NUGSE Research in Education*, 2(1), 2-11. Retrieved from nugserie.nu.edu.kz

Volume 2, Issue 1
June 2017

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Integration of Returnee Children in Kazakhstani Schools

NURGUL TERLIK BAYEVA

This research is devoted to exploring the adaptation experience of returnee children in Kazakhstani schools. Upon arrival, returnee children who have not been exposed to Kazakh culture encounter social and psychological challenges. Because of the absence of educational policies for migrant children, the Kazakhstani education system fails to meet the needs of returnee children as they are required to enroll into mainstream schools. Relying on the empirical evidence and literature on the integration of returnee children, this study attempts to understand the challenges returnee children face in Kazakhstani schools and how these children cope with the alleged challenges. In the course of the study, returnee children reported language, Kazakhstani education system and teacher attitudes to be the major challenges they have faced. One solution to this problem would be a reconsideration of the existing educational program in Kazakhstan on inclusive education which targets only disabled children. Kazakhstani policy makers should consider widening the scope of its meaning including culturally disadvantaged returnee children in its agenda.

Keywords: returnees, *oralman*, adaptation, integration, experience

Introduction

The history of the return of ethnic Kazakhs to Kazakh land goes back to Soviet times. After independence from Soviet Union, Kazakhstan promoted a diaspora politics which concentrated on attracting ethnic Kazakhs to their homeland, leading to an increase in returnees. Ethnic repatriation appeared as a symbolic act of historical justice and an important tool in shifting the demographic balance in favor of Kazakhs (Oka, 2013, p. 1). In addition, the arrival of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad was intended to increase the number of carriers of the Kazakh language and culture that would change a socio-cultural aspect of the country (Bokayev, Kazhenova, Beisembayeva, Nurgalieva, & Zharkynbekova, 2012; Oka, 2013).

Thousands of ethnic Kazakhs, referred to as *oralman*, are coming to Kazakhstan with families and children. Mahmudova (2009) states that traditionally, an *oralman* family has many children and *oralman* children account for 41% of all immigrants who came to Kazakhstan since the independence. In 2007, the number of returnee children (up to 18 years old) made up 268,000 (Shakirov, 2008). The question arises: how are these children integrated into Kazakhstani schools and how they adapt to a new culture and education system?

Kazakhstan's Policy Regarding Inclusive Education

Kazakhstan has decided to add inclusive education to its agenda after 20 years of independence. This occurred as the general public has become more involved in the task of fostering conditions for opportunities and equal rights for Kazakhstani citizens.

One of the important goals of the “State Program of Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020” is the development of inclusive education (MES, 2010). The program includes measures of creating a legal framework for children with developmental disabilities to be involved in the general education area (Moshenskaya, 2012). Even though this model targets to embrace learners from all sectors of the society—disabled, returnees, migrants, gifted children, children from socio-economically deprived families—so far, Kazakhstani education reformers have defined inclusive education as that which focuses only on disabled people. The wider sense of inclusion may be, as Jadrina (2007) states, “reflected in our country’s educational policy,” but “not shown vividly” (p. 1).

Statement of the Problem

The adaptation of returnee children and their integration into society is an important issue because returnees are often alienated by locals, especially the returnee children. Returnees are treated differently and are considered to be strangers by local people. Bokayev (2013) describes the difficulties of adjustment to the Kazakhstani conditions due to the fact that returnees spent considerable time growing up in a territory with a different society and culture. Also, Bokayev (2013) observes that local Kazakhs and returned Kazakhs differ from each other by different culture, mentality, behavior and speech. As an example, Bokayev presents an autobiographical text:

When I arrived, pupils from my class were interested in me and wanted to learn more about me. They asked me if I ate snakes or frogs in China, if Chinese are disgraceful and slovenly and they added if I was similar to them. In the beginning I was very angry being asked such questions, but then I began to explain everything. I told them that I did not know such things about Chinese; the only thing I knew for sure was that I was Kazakh and Muslim and therefore, we did not eat such food... (student, 21, moved from China in 2005). (p. 795)

Conceptualizing the term "returnee"

The term returnee is defined differently across the literature. "Returnee" is the term used by the international community to identify a person who was a refugee, but who has recently returned to their country of origin (OHCHR, 2001). In the case of this research, this term refers to immigrants from China, the second and the third descendants of Kazakhs who were born and/or raised abroad and returned to their ancestors' home country. In this study, the both terms *returnee* and *oralman* are used interchangeably since their meaning is identical. The term *oralman* is derived from the Kazakh verb *oralu* which means to return (Cerny, 2010). According to Kazakhstani law, *oralman* are defined as "foreigners or individuals without citizenship or Kazakh nationality who, resided abroad and who came to Kazakhstan seeking a permanent residence after the independence" (as cited in Bokayev, 2013, p. 795).

Purpose, Focus, and Relevance of the Study

Because of the focus on (a) inclusive education in this nation's education strategy, and (b) on nation-building and creating a unique Kazakh identity, I focus on the integration of returnee children in Kazakhstani schools. This study is aimed at analyzing the adaptation experience of returnee children in Kazakhstani schools. In particular, this research is guided by the following research questions:

- What challenges do returnee children face in schools in Kazakhstan?
- How do returnee immigrants cope with those challenges?

This research holds an urgent significance both on micro and macro levels. On a micro level, it enables educators and policy makers to develop special trainings or programs for teachers and parents on the integration of returnee children into schools. On a macro level, in light of the nation building process, this study enables researchers to accumulate data on social integration of *oralman*.

Kazakhstani Research on *Oralman*

Returnee migration has been one of the problems that are the subject of study for many scientists in Kazakhstan. Galimova (2007) discusses two factors, internal and external, which influence on the adaptation of migrants in the new environment (p. 131). Subjective factors are internal characteristics of the migrant population, including "age, sex, education, specialty, marital status and financial wellbeing" (Tkachev, as cited in Galimova, 2007, p. 131). Galimova (2007) argues that depending on these characteristics migrants make up certain integration strategies in a host society. However, Mahmudova (2009) focuses more on the external factors pointing out two drawbacks: 1) imperfect regulatory and legal framework, 2) underdeveloped arrangement documents for the reception of returnees' registration (p. 1). The language barrier is the next adaptation problem which returnees face in Kazakhstan (Kalshabayeva & Seisenbayeva, 2013; Mahmudova, 2009). According to study of Mahmudova (2009), returnees found it difficult to register their documents due to the fact that they are not able to write and read in Cyrillic. Her study notes that Kazakhs from China do not speak Russian, the language of international communication in Kazakhstan. In addition, this incompetence in language influences the relationship between the indigenous Kazakhs and the returnees (Mahmudova, 2009). Since "Russian is the language of interaction with state institutions," a good command of Russian is of great importance for returnees to adapt and integrate into the society (Bokayev et al., 2012, p. 7).

Unlike the abovementioned scholars, Baimoldina et al. (2013) focuses on the importance of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation of the returnees, revealing that nearly all the returnees experienced stress and underwent social exclusion. The authors concluded that the adaptation of the repatriates depends on the age and the younger the returnees more successfully and quickly they adapt to the new settings (p. 687).

According to Kasymova (2012), another emerging problem is that cultural capital of senior repatriates, which was accumulated outside Kazakhstan, creates cultural capital of their children and it affects the cognitive assimilation of the new realities of Kazakhstan. The author (2012) argues that returnees consider themselves culturally self-sufficient because they are carriers of traditional/indigenous Kazakh culture. This implies that parent *oralman* considered Kazakhstan to be the same as it was when they left many years ago. The truth is that

much have been changed since they left the country. They bring their already formed worldview and value system to a country which is now in a different historical period than when their ancestors lived there. Kasymova (2012) concludes that returnees experience culture shock from the differences between the imaginary land of ancestors and contemporary realities of Kazakh society (p. 2). Bokayev (2013) considers that the attitude of the “representatives of the local community” towards the returnees is important. When the speech or pronunciation of a person differs from the standard language, the person stays a “stranger” to the community or society, “a representative of another culture” (p. 196).

Interestingly, a significant number of scholarly works around the issue fall between 2005-2013. However, the return migration started in early 90-es, which means that issue of returnees was not discussed and addressed for a decade or more.

International research on returnees

International experience tells much about returnee children and their integration. Prior to Kazakhstan, the researchers of other countries such as Germany, Japan have engaged in discussion about the immigrants as the representatives of these mentioned countries are more exposed to migration. In Japan, Enloe and Lewin (1987) and Kidder (1992) discuss the differences between returnees and locals, and the adjustment factors that affect the integration of returnee children in society. There is another bulk of research by Sellek (1997), Riordan (2014), and Sugino (2009), who investigated returnees who highly differ from those returnees that have been mentioned. These returnees are called *nikkeijin*, a term that refers specifically to descendants Japanese who emigrated to the South America (Brazil) between 1868 and 1973 (Sellek, 1997). Sugino (2009) investigated the psychological, social and educational problems that *nikkeijin* face. Japanese descendants have been exposed to and adopted Latin American culture which led to the creation of cultural difference between returnees and those who stayed (Sellek, 1997). The *nikkeijin* claim that in Brazil they were called Japanese and in Japan they were called foreigners. The incompetency of the Japanese language by *nikkeijin* children is another challenge both the government and *nikkeijin* face (Sellek, 1997).

Similar to Japan and Kazakhstan, Germany has a rich experience in migration. The *Aussiedler* (a term referring to returnees) community has attracted scholars' attention since their share in Germany is respectively high. For Orloff and Frey (2007), *Aussiedler* refers to Russian Germans who emigrated from the former Soviet Union. In the initial phase, the number of *Aussiedler* were few, but after the fall of Berlin Wall, Germany experienced an influx of returnees. After 1993, the second wave of repatriation took place these repatriates are called *Spataussiedler*, a term for returnees who came later (Orloff & Frey, 2007). Language and the school system are reported to be the most common challenge returnees face, leading to psychological and social problems.

Unlike these two countries, Kazakh ethnicities' migration is observed as political and social rather than economical. Internationally, the returnee children and their integration into the society has been subject of a number of investigations. Even though public concern towards returnees is high, there is almost zero research conducted on the *oralman* children in Kazakhstan. It is noticed that the fate and social problems of returnee children are similar in all mentioned above three countries.

Methodology

The integration of returnee children is a central phenomenon which needs the analysis and understanding. Creswell (2014) notes that for educators seeking a personal experience in real school settings, narrative research offers practical, concrete knowledge. With the help of specially designed narrative interview questions, I was able to involve the returnee children to tell their stories and consequently obtain information about their life experiences. This information assisted in the exploration of the returnee children's adaptation experiences and their process of integration into the school society. As a narrator and a researcher, I also took into account the children's feelings, expressions and emotions. Constructing a narrative, I obtained a micro-analytic picture which successfully helps to understand the central phenomenon of this research study.

By means of homogenous sampling method, I purposefully selected returnee children who came from China and who shared the same characteristics of age, gender, and school participation. The selected participants study in Kazakhstani schools. I included four participants overall: one participant is a high school student and the other three are the first year university students. The names given are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Findings and Discussions

This study is mainly based on two students' (Nar and Auez) narratives, as they recently arrived to Kazakhstan and at this time are fully and consciously experiencing school life. Nar started going to school from 9th grade and she is now in the 11th grade. Auez also started going to Kazakhstani school from the 9th grade and now he is a first-year university student. The experiences of two other participants are considered supplementary, due to the length of time spent in Kazakhstani schools. Compared to the first two students, Temir started going to Kazakhstani schools when he was a primary school age child, and nearly a decade passed since he has experienced life in Kazakhstani schools. The fourth participant, Aiza, is now a first-year university student, experienced only a year at Kazakhstani schools. Together, their stories give an insight into the life of returnee children in schools.

Case Story with Nar

As a third-generation Kazakh living in China, Nar had never experienced life in Kazakhstan. Upon arrival to Kazakhstan, Nar first went to an urban school in North Kazakhstan. She states that after classes and during the break times students speak in mixed language, with Russian language dominating. Since it has been difficult to understand and socialize with her classmates, Nar's family has decided to move to the suburb and change the school. The new school is different from the central urban school; all students and people there speak Kazakh. Nevertheless, still it is difficult for her to understand the Kazakh language. The most commonly used terms are derived from Russian, and her Kazakh is different from the Kazakh language the locals use. She explains that *oralman* use archaic Kazakh. This barrier isolates and prevents her from socializing with her classmates.

Relationships. Nar claimed that her classmates showed her a positive attitude. She believed that such positive attitude was due to her knowledge obtained in China. In China much emphasis was put on knowledge and students studied hard and spent the whole day in schools. She was good at science and came here with prior knowledge from Math and physics. Her knowledge showed her in a good light. Her peers were also interested in the country she came from. The local peers wanted to know more about the Chinese culture and language and asked her to sing or speak in Chinese. Her ability to master Chinese enhanced her status among classmates as well. It was not so easy to build a rapport with teachers. Some teachers held negative attitudes towards her, at least initially. They did not regard her as Kazakh, but as a backward Kazakh from China. She states that the adaptation of returnee children in the class and school highly depends on teachers. She noted, with sorrow: "if the teachers reject us then how the returnees will adapt to the new environment?" As a hardworking student, she was soon able to prove to the Kazakh literature teacher that she was not ignorant. She just needed time to get used to the writing and was able to read in a short time.

Difficulties and challenges. In general, Nar believes that all her difficulties are linked to language. The most difficult for her was Russian language. The Russian language teacher's attitude towards her has never been positive. She states:

My Russian teacher does not like me and gives bad marks and looks at me as if I was a backward person. I think I am a headache for her. She has never understood that I have come from a different country where the language is different and I had never experienced Russian language before. She never puts herself in my position. According to the teacher, everybody has to master Russian and she thinks that Russian language is a language which can be taken for granted.

Because of insufficient information and understanding about Chinese education system and culture that *oralman* experience, teachers regarded her as one of the ordinary Kazakhstani students and demanded the same efforts. Nar states:

They even did not know that we used Arab alphabet in China and Cyrillic was new for us, and they did not understand that it was difficult for us to read books in Cyrillic. I needed time to get used to the Kazakhstani education system. But teachers demanded a lot from me. They kept giving me bad marks.

Nar suggests that teachers should not assess students immediately and teachers should give time for *oralman* to get used to the education system and to mastering Cyrillic writing.

Coping with challenges. Nar coped with those difficulties using her social skills. She considers herself a communicative person. During her first days, it was difficult to ask for help from others. Later, when students accepted her as a knowledgeable student and saw her efforts and attempts, they voluntarily helped her. She always relied on her classmates when she did not understand Russian word and terms. Classmates translated for her, and in turn she helped some students in science subjects.

Nevertheless, there were some teachers who paid attention to her problems. The history teacher helped her substantially and was very supportive. Nar recalled her own experience with a history teacher happily and ironically described the teacher. She states even though the teacher was strict and reserved, he liked Nar. And he implicitly helped Nar as he saw potential in her. The teacher gave her a month to read 5th-8th grade history textbooks of Kazakhstan. First, she thought it was impossible to read all the books in a month, but the teacher's expectation and attention gave her hope. The teacher noticed her efforts and in a short time she proved her ability. From then on, the teacher asked her to take part in conferences and debates. Through history, her love for Kazakh literature has awakened and in a year, she was one of the best students and mastered the Kazakh language and writing. She took part in Olympiads and won first places, and now she is regarded as one of the best students in that school.

Case Story with Auez

In 2009, Auez came to Kazakhstan for the first time. His parents settled down in a village in the East Kazakhstan where his relatives lived. He started going to a Kazakhstani rural school from the 9th grade. Before coming to Kazakhstan, he got information about Kazakhstani schools from his elder brother who went to Kazakhstan earlier. He found out that school day was short in Kazakhstani schools compared to Chinese schools where it would have taken the whole day. Since his parents strictly follow Kazakh traditions and are up-to-date with news related to Kazakhstani, he got to know more about Kazakhstan and its history.

Kazakhstani TV channels also aided in learning more about contemporary life in the country. He states all these things developed his sense of belonging to his homeland, Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, in 2009 all Kazakh channels were prohibited in China. With a deep sympathy, he expressed his feelings towards Kazakhs living there. Auez states:

It is such a pity that now the Kazakh generation living in China is limited; Kazakh TV channels do not exist anymore. They do not listen to the news in our mother tongue anymore. I am afraid young generation like me is gradually being assimilated to China, which is the main goal of the Chinese government. Anyway, I am happy I am here, I knew from my childhood that one day I would return to my homeland. There is a Kazakh proverb which says "The destination of a grain is a mill." Having this proverb in mind I have known my destination is Kazakhstan.

Relationships. For a couple of weeks, it was difficult for Auez to quickly engage in discussion with peers and socialize. There was a language barrier, as his classmates' Kazakh language differed from his Kazakh. He could not understand them because there were many Russian words in their speech. He was often isolated due to the lack of language proficiency. Sometime later, he started to understand their speech and was able to talk on any theme. In general, his Kazakhstani classmates were very warm and they welcomed him. Their attitude towards him was positive. They looked at him with admiration, and regarded him as a person who came from a well-known big country. They were curious; they wanted to know more about China. He states:

I remember when I attended my first class, it was a math lesson. There were students at the board and could not solve mathematical problem. I approached them and solved it. Thus, my ability also contributed to students' positive attitude towards me.

His academic performance was high, and was one of the best students in the class. He was an active student who actively participated in different school events. He played a Kazakhstani national instrument and sang songs. In a short time, he was loved by all students and teachers.

As for the relationship with teachers, Auez managed to find mutual understanding with them. However, there were some teachers who did not accept his in-class-behavior. Those teachers explicitly showed their negative attitude towards Auez. He did not resist; conversely, he tried to follow the rules teachers imposed. He states that not all the teachers were the same, some teachers also helped him. His homeroom teacher, for example, asked the monitor to look after him in case he had any problems.

Challenges. He came to Kazakhstan prepared; his elder cousin taught him Cyrillic and always sent him various literary books in Kazakh. This helped him to get used to Kazakhstani school quickly. However, language stayed one of the top issues due to his difficulty in Russian. He had also problems with teachers and the Kazakhstani education system. Teachers did not understand that he came from a different country where the education system and teaching approach were different. As he said, students get used to the teachers and their method of teaching and students behave according to teachers' methods. In Kazakhstan, teachers ask students individually and address questions to individual students one by one, and other students have to raise hands and ask permission to answer. Meanwhile in China, he claims, teachers generally pose a particular question to the whole class, and only volunteers answer the questions. As Auez explains:

Once, the teacher directed a question to a particular student and that student could not answer, then I answered immediately. I did it several times and teacher was annoyed and shouted at me saying "how did China brought you up"? I tried to explain that in China they acted like this, but she did not listen to me. Since that time, I tried to follow classroom rules in Kazakhstani schools.

Coping with challenges. In the earlier days, it was difficult; however, he was lucky because his relative cousin who was born in Kazakhstan was of the same age, and they were in the same class. His cousin was like a mediator between classmates and him. His classmates helped him in writing and proofreading. Later when he got used to the students he became a little braver. When his classmates spoke in Russian or in mixed language, he asked his classmates to talk in Kazakh. When he had problem with teachers, he did not turn to his parents and relied on himself, because he believed he was mature enough to solve his own problems. He tried not to resist but acted and behaved like his peers. He states that he learned the lesson not to correct teachers and not to answer without teacher's permission.

Case Story with Temir

Temir and his parents moved to Kazakhstan in 2004. Temir started going to a rural school from the 4th grade. According to Temir, his love towards homeland awakened in his early ages. He used to watch Kazakhstani TV channels in China and his father always mentioned Kazakhstan and how he wanted to raise his children in the Kazakh culture.

Relationship. Temir's classmates respected him and he easily made friends with them. He claims that thanks to his knowledge and ability to study, he gained both his classmates' and teachers' trust and respect. Temir was the only returnee in his class of 19 children. All the children were interested in him and wanted to know more about China. Every day during the break his classmates rounded him and asked to tell about China. Temir states:

Once, one of my classmates asked me if I had seen Jackie-Chan and if Bruce Lee had ever visited the village I came from. This moment I never forget. Now it is very funny, but those times I was a child and seriously told him that I had never seen Jackie-Chan.

Difficulties and challenges. After moving to Kazakhstan, Temir encountered language problems in school. First, writing in Cyrillic was difficult. Russian language was a real challenge for him as it was a complete new language which he had never studied before.

Coping with challenges. In Kazakhstan, he claims students who are good in studies always sit at the front desks in the first rows of the class. Temir said that he was one of the best students and he also had a seat at the front. Thanks to this he had a chance to ask help from knowledgeable students who welcomed giving him a hand. Mostly those students in the front of the class gave him information and advice.

His teachers liked him due to his efforts and talent. He claims that his mathematical skills were good and he was good in math. His homeroom teacher always praised him and he became popular in that school.

Case Story with Aiza

Aiza is a first-year university student. She came to Kazakhstan already having graduated from a 12-year school in China. However, she had to go to school in Kazakhstan and she studied from the 11 grade, as she was told that only those who take national test could go to higher education. Aiza explained her desire and reason for coming and studying in Kazakhstan:

There are more advantages in Kazakhstan compared to China. There is a lot of opportunity

to grow. In China, Kazakhs are regarded as minorities and there is no chance for growth. The competition is so big in China that it is impossible to be seen in high positions. Kazakhs there are underprivileged.

Relationship. Aiza claims that Kazakhstani children are positive and they showed a positive attitude when she came to Kazakhstan. However, she could not socialize with her peers immediately. First, she started to socialize with a girl who was sitting next to her. After a short time, she became friends with her classmates. She says that students are the firsts who initiated communicating with her. She came here with high academic achievement and soon her classmates witness her good knowledge and started closely socializing with her. She claims Kazakhstani students are open and sociable compared to Chinese students who are more reserved and serious. Her classmates were eager to talk to her about life in China, the culture and traditions were most interesting for them.

Difficulties and challenges. Aiza points out language as one of the difficulties she had encountered in Kazakhstan. In Chinese education, much emphasis is put on China. She links it to nationalization of minorities. Aiza states:

The schools we attend make much emphasis on Chinese language. There are few hours in English. In primary school, we studied Kazakh language and literature in the Arabic alphabet, but when we went to boarding school after 4th grade, the Kazakh language was completely eliminated from the program.

When she came, her English and Kazakh were poor and Russian was a completely new language for her. One of the advantages for her was that she went to a village school where the Kazakh language dominated. The local villagers rarely used mixed Russian and Kazakh in their speech.

Coping with challenges. When Aiza had difficulties connected to languages she relied on her classmates who reluctantly helped her with translation and explanation. Like Temir's classmates, Aiza's peers also did proofreading for her. Not only the students but teachers also helped her. She claims that teachers are mostly supportive, and gave additional lessons in Russian and English to catch up. She thinks that she got help from teachers only for the sake of a national test and the school's image. She says that it was in the teachers' interest that students would get acceptable score on the Unified National Test. Now she has started studying at university, and she still encounters language problems. University students talk mostly in Russian. She says when people ask or talk to her in Russian she replies to them in Kazakh. Sometimes she tells them that she doesn't speak Russian and requests them to ask in Kazakh.

Discussion: Relationships

The research findings revealed that all four participants' relationships with their local peers were very good. Returnee children claim that these good relationships occurred due to the following reasons: knowledge, international reputation, and personality.

The participants claimed that their good knowledge in subjects, particularly in science, enhanced their status. The participants frequently emphasized the better quality of education in China, which helped them build relationships with their Kazakhstani peers. Owing to this fact, returnee children gained full trust from their peers. The teachers of those subjects the returnee children were good at also had a positive relationship with returnee children and were more supportive.

The second reason is tied with the country they came from. All four participants note that the coming from a big well-known country like China also helped them build positive relationships with peers. The local peers were fascinated by China and they wanted to know more about China and its culture. Moreover, returnee children's mastery of Chinese made them to be more interested and for this reason, their peers tried to socialize with them. This factor was proved to be true in the past research by Kanno (2000) who states that "returnee students can attain their maximum potential when they are appreciated for their bilingual and bicultural existence" (p. 13).

Finally, Nar, Auez and Temir claim that their personal traits also assisted to build a good relationship with their peers. They see themselves as open, sociable and active persons. They could perform in public and engage in classroom activities like singing or reading poems. These attributes made them popular in their schools.

Discussion: Challenges

In the initial phase when the returnee children started to go to Kazakhstani schools, they faced common challenges. The core challenge was language both written and oral Kazakh. This finding is consistent with the Kazakhstani scholars' findings who claim that language is one of the challenges *oralmans* face (Bokayev et al., 2012; Kalshabayeva & Seisenbayeva, 2013; Kasymova, 2012; Mahmudova, 2009). Although the children were fluent in Kazakh, they found it difficult to understand the local people's dialect of Kazakh, which dramatically differed from the Kazakh they spoke. Cyrillic was another challenge students encountered when they first came. Reading in Cyrillic took a great deal of time, and they were not able to read textbooks fast enough. Children claim that their ignorance about Russian and lack of mastery of written language was a great barrier. Nar states that due to her ignorance of Russian and inability to read fluently caused negative attitude from teachers. Previous research supports these findings, stating that when migrants are subjected to discrimination, their self-esteem drops and level of stress goes up (Brenik et al. 2012, p. 106)

Apart from language, the education system in Kazakhstan was one of the challenges the returnees encountered. Particularly, Auez and Nar claim that education system is different and it took time to get used to it. According to Auez, teachers tend to ask particular individual to answer to a particular question, whereas the rest should keep silence till the student answers. He was used to the Chinese system and when he acted like in a Chinese classroom, Kazakhstani teachers punished him. Nar emphasized the importance of the provision of information about returnees: the country they come from, the education system of that country, the culture of that country. It is found out that without taking into account these facts (culture, system) teachers regarded returnees as one of the ordinary Kazakhstani students and demanded the same efforts. Participants claim that teachers should give time to returnees to get used to the education system and to a new environment. This finding highlights the study of Sellek (1997) which states that adopting other culture, the Japanese descendants experienced cultural difference on arrival to Japan. Additionally, this finding reinforces Bokayev's (2013) study which states that returnee children face the difficulties of adjustment to the Kazakhstani conditions due to the fact that returnees spent considerable time growing up in a territory with a different society and culture.

Discussion: Coping with challenges

As a coping strategy, the returnee children rely on their peers help and themselves rather than parents. All participants noted that their peers were supportive and had always given hand when encountered problems with language, reading and writing. The second strategy they used was to explain about their status that they were *Oralman* and they did not speak Russian. Nar, Auez and Aiza often have come across with the situation when the Kazakhs in the street asked or replied in Russian. In such situations, they replied that they did not speak Russian and asked locals to speak Kazakh. It is important to note that the explanatory approach the returnee children used to overcome language challenges adds insights into what is already known in Kazakhstani research on *oralmans*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These empirical findings of the study have consistently highlighted 1) the challenges returnee children face at schools in Kazakhstan, and 2) how they cope with those challenges. This study revealed that returnee children experienced language barrier challenges both in Russian and Kazakh. The research has also revealed that most teachers at Kazakhstani schools do not get background information about returnees who came from China (its culture, education system, alphabet they used). This research also found that returnee children's relationship from China with local peers was very good. As for the coping strategy in academic settings, they mostly relied on their peers' help.

Jadrina (2007) states that inclusive education is used in narrow understanding and its target is to meet only the needs of disabled children with "the admission to general education process"(p. 1). Relying on this evidence and the findings of this empirical study, it became clear that there is not any specific educational policy for immigrant or returnee children in Kazakhstan. It also comes clear that the burden rests on localities and the educators.

New findings of this study have revealed a gap in the policy on inclusive education in Kazakhstan. Because of being joined to mainstream schools and incompetence of language, returnees encounter psychological and social problems. This study urges policy makers to reconsider the educational program in Kazakhstan on inclusive education in order to better integrate returnee children into schools and draw educators' attention to the issue of culturally disadvantaged returnee children.

This qualitative narrative study enabled us to understand the central phenomenon. However, this study could be extended by employing quantitative research. It would provide precise information and more generalizable results, and would help present a clear picture of social integration of the young returnees throughout Kazakhstan. The accumulated findings of this study may contribute to further research, by comparing, refining and elaborating the findings of this study and those embracing larger population from various regions of the country. For example, future studies should examine not only returnee children from China but from other countries such as Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and Tajikistan.

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